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Winner

## Spring 2010 Knight Award for Writing Exercises and Handouts

The Knight Award for Writing Exercises recognizes excellence in short exercises and/or handouts designed to improve student writing. Appropriate topics may be drawn from the whole range of writing issues, large scale to small scale, such as development of theses, use of secondary sources, organization of evidence, awareness of audience, attention to sentence patterns (e.g., passive/active voice, coordination/ subordination), attention to diction, uses of punctuation, attention to mechanics (e.g., manuscript formats, apostrophes). Exercises and handouts may be developed for use in and/or out of class.

Submissions should comprise three parts: (1) A copy of the handouts or instructions that go to students. (2) An explanation of the exercise/ handout and of the principles behind it addressed to future instructors who may use the material. (3) If possible, an example of a student response.

Submissions may range in length from one to four or five pages.

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The two winning entries will receive \$350; honorable mentions (if any) will receive \$125.

Submissions are due in 101 McGraw Hall by Friday, May 14. No exceptions can be made.

## Spring 2010 Knight Award for Writing Exercises and Handouts

~Please Print Clearly~

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Revision, Revision, Revision

Title of Writing Exercises

Instructor's signature



Date 5/14/2010

### Part 1: Revision, Revision, Revision

**The Problem:** Very few of us are “good writers.” What I mean is that few people are able to sit down, put pen to paper, and produce excellent prose. Most people who we think of as “good writers” are, in fact, good editors. That is, good writers are people who can ruthlessly look at their own writing, or someone else’s, and understand how to modify, transform, edit, shift, cut, add, and rearrange it to produce clear, lucid, prose. As a friend once told me, “We all have bad writing in us. We just have to get it out.” Only then you can begin to transform it into a polished final product.

**The Challenge:** The best way to learn how to do this is to practice. Often it is easiest to get used to doing this with other people’s work. Today you are going to practice on someone else’s work: mine. On the back of this sheet is a paragraph from an early draft of one of my dissertation chapters. Your job, working in groups of four, is to make it better. Everything is up for grabs. You can change the grammar, the word choice, the organization, or anything else you feel is necessary to turn this uninspired and rough paragraph into something I can be proud of.

**Things to Consider:** There are a number of ways to revise and a number of things to consider as you are reading your own or someone else’s work. We have covered some of these in our discussion of Chapter 4 & 5 of Hjortshoj’s *Transition to College Writing*. Use this information as you consider my paragraph. Additionally, you may want to ask yourself the following questions:

- Can the prose be improved?
  - Are the sentences too long and, if so, should they be split to make them more intelligible?
  - Are there unnecessary clauses that can be removed to make the sentences more clear?
  - Should the paragraph be split into multiple paragraphs to make the argument easier to follow?
  - Are there grammatical mistakes that can be fixed?
  - Are there missing transition phrases or sentences that should be added in?
- What is the main argument of this paragraph? Is it clear? And if not, how can we make it clearer?
- Does the organization of the paragraph make sense? If not, should the sentences be re-ordered to flow more logically from one to the next?
- What claims are being made here? What evidence supports them? Is the link between claim and evidence clear?
- Are there extraneous sentences that don’t belong in this paragraph (even if they might belong elsewhere)?

Remember, your job is to help me transform this admittedly weak paragraph into something that is clear and effective. Make *any* changes you feel are necessary to accomplish this.

**The Reward:** I will revise this paragraph based on each team’s instructions (NOTE—that means you need to choose a scribe with legible handwriting and make your instructions and desires clear). I will then send the revisions out to four independent judges (each of whom I personally respect as good writers). These judges include: a professional journalist, a historian, an anthropologist, and a sociologist. I will ask the judges to rank each revision in order of clarity, quality, and overall strength of the writing. The team with the highest-ranked paragraph will receive a full-letter grade’s worth of extra-credit on one of their short essays.

**My Original Paragraph:** Abrams' point is instructive for political sociologists seeking to navigate complex bureaucracies, understand their logics, and discover their "secrets." Indeed, his analysis suggests that we would do better to attend to the moments and processes of obfuscation themselves, seeking to understand how concealment happens, rather than to doggedly pursue what is concealed. If the study of the state is fundamentally a study of political power, then, within Abrams' analytic, the task of the researcher might be construed as seeking out and puncturing moments where the state-idea and state-system collide in particularly brittle configurations. Projects of protecting information might be thought of as just such moments. To reflect further on the difficulties of studying the state in the context of Bengal, then, I revisit a series of moments of frustration, denial of access, and intimidation within my own research. From the outset, the question of studying the enclaves posed a series of problems. It is notoriously difficult for researchers, particularly foreign researchers, to conduct research in India's border regions. Such cartographic anxiety (Krishna 1996) means research on borders is, by definition, "sensitive," not just because it takes as its focus unstable border regions where often violent projects of state-building manifest, but also because the results of such research threaten to pose challenging questions to notions of national identity, territorial integrity, and state legitimacy. Securing visas and permissions to conduct this work provide quite difficult.

### **Explanation of writing exercise:**

**Goals:** I used this exercise early in my class (the second week), to accomplish several goals:

1. I wanted to build cohesion and cooperation within the class by getting them to work on a fun and challenging project. The award had little impact on their overall grade (short essays are more like reading responses in my class). But it motivated them to work diligently on the project. I had a very competitive class.
2. I wanted to get them to apply some of the lessons on revision that we had been discussing in class to prose that was not their own. I hoped that this would set them up to apply it to their own work, and to their peers' work, more effectively.
3. I wanted to use this as a means to set the tone for a peer review exercise that we began in the next class. In previous semesters, I noticed that peer reviews tended to focus only on surface level problems and rarely got into deeper structural issues. I hoped that challenging students to engage this paragraph on both a grammatical and organizational level led to more in-depth and constructive peer reviews.
4. I wanted to emphasize that no one is an *a priori* good writer. By giving them a piece of extremely weak prose from my own writing, I hoped to emphasize that editing and improving one's writing is an ongoing process that is part of every writing project, not something that one masters and then moves beyond.
5. By giving them an opportunity to critique my own writing, I hoped to share a bit of humility with students and encourage them not to feel bad about my critiques of their own writing. Throughout the course, I tried to remind students that writing is something that everyone, including myself, struggles with and the only way to improve is to practice and revise, revise, revise.

**Process:** I split the groups up into teams of three or four. Before they began, I gave them the barest outlines of my own research and its goals, but I did not go into the specifics about what I was trying to achieve in the paragraph or who the authors I was referencing were. I wanted my students to try to work out their own meanings from my prose and struggle with ways to make these interpretations clear. I revised the paragraph based on each group's instructions and sent them out to four judges (all friends of mine who's writing I am familiar with and who are, at least partially, familiar with my own work). I asked the judges to rank the paragraphs from weakest to strongest based on the clarity of the prose and improvement over the initial paragraph. I also asked the judges to provide a high-level rationale for their decisions.

**Outcomes:** I was pleased with the outcome of this exercise. Students both enjoyed and, I believe, got a lot out of the project. I found that students really enjoy critiquing my own work (indeed, they were almost gleeful about ripping it apart). It helped them to recognize that, despite the fact that I was their instructor, my own writing is far from perfect and revision is as much a part of my writing style as theirs. Getting a chance to turn the tables and critique my work also helped to establish a more comfortable rapport. It allowed me to be more direct in my own feedback without making them "feel bad" about problems with their prose. Finally, students also enjoyed having a panel of external "experts" vet their work. It made the exercise seem somehow more "official" and real. I think it also helped students consider more structural revisions of their own work and, at least partially, contributed to more thorough and helpful peer reviews than I have seen in previous semesters.

There was an added benefit to this exercise that I had not anticipated. It allowed us to talk about how, despite there being principles and parameters of good writing, what counts as excellent writing is, largely, subjective. While there was a winning group, there was little consensus among the reviewers as to an overall ranking. Once the "results" were in, we spent some time in class talking about what each judge liked about each group's edits. This allowed me to point out that not only is good prose "subjective," but that its subjective-ness is linked to the concerns, interests, and training of each individual reader.

## **Revision Exercise Responses**

### **Group 1:**

It is notoriously difficult for researchers to conduct research in India's border regions. Krishna terms such problems "cartographic anxiety." This anxiety means that research on borders is, by definition, "sensitive," not just because it takes as its focus unstable border regions where violent projects of state building manifest, but also because the results of such research threaten to pose challenging questions to notions of national identity, territorial integrity, and state legitimacy. Abrams point is instructive for political sociologists seeking to navigate complex bureaucracies, understand their logic, and discover their "secrets." Indeed, his analysis suggests that we would do better to understand how concealment happens, rather than doggedly pursue what is concealed. If the study of the state is fundamentally a study of political power, then, within Abrams' analytic, the task of the researcher might be construed as seeking out and puncturing moments where the state-idea and state-system collide in particularly brittle configurations. To reflect further on the difficulties of studying the state, specifically in the context of Bengal, I will revisit a series of moments of frustration, denial of access, and intimidation within my own research.

### **Group 2:**

Abrams' point is relevant to political sociologists who seek to navigate complex bureaucracies, understand their logic, and discover their "secrets." Indeed, his analysis suggests that we should attend to the moments and processes of obfuscation, and seek to understand how their concealment happens. If the study of the state is fundamentally a study of political power, then the task of the researcher might be construed as unearthing moments where the state-idea and state-system collide in brittle configurations. Projects of protecting information exemplify such collisions.

To reflect further on the difficulties of studying the state in the context of Bengal, I revisit numerous moments of frustration resulting from, denial of access and intimidation within my own research. Initially, the question of studying the enclaves posed a series of problems; it is notoriously difficult for researchers, particularly foreign researchers, to study India's border regions. Such cartographic anxiety (Krishna 1996) makes border research "sensitive," not only because it focuses on unstable border regions, but also because the results of such research threaten to challenge notions of national identity, territorial integrity, and state legitimacy.

### **Group 3:**

Abrams' analysis suggests that political sociologists seeking to navigate complex bureaucracies should focus on moments and processes of concealment themselves. Rather than doggedly pursue what is concealed, we should seek to understand how and why concealment happens. According to Abrams, if the study of the state is fundamentally a study of political power, then the task of the researcher is to explore moments where the state idea and state-system collide in particularly brittle configurations. Projects of protecting information might be thought of as just such moments of intersection.

From the outset, the question of studying the Bengal state's enclaves posed a series of problems. It is notoriously difficult for researchers, particularly foreign researchers, to conduct research in India's border regions. Such cartographic anxiety (Krishna 1996) means research on borders is "sensitive," not because of unstable border regions where often violent projects of state-building manifest, but rather because the results of such research threaten to pose challenging questions to notions of national identity, territorial integrity, and state legitimacy. Thus, securing visas and permissions to conduct this work prove quite difficult.

### **Group 4:**

The purpose of research according to Abrams is to better to understand how concealment happens, rather than to doggedly pursue what is concealed. It therefore follows that, the task of the researcher is to seek out puncturing moments where the state-idea and state-system collide in particularly brittle configurations, such as various areas plagued with territorial disputes. I have found in my own

experience in Bengal that it is notoriously difficult for researchers, particularly foreign researchers, to conduct research in India's border regions. To reflect further on the difficulties of studying the state in the context of Bengal, then, I revisit a series of moments of frustration, denial of access, and intimidation within my own research. From the outset, the question of studying the enclaves posed a series of problems. Countries like this view sociological work as hostile not only because this research exposes violent project of state-building but poses challenging questions to notions of national identity, territorial integrity, and state legitimacy. To prevent this, countries often deny visa permission of consent to such research. By not posing these questions the researcher corrupts his/her desire to follow Abrams' ideology. Thus the researcher is often posed with a dilemma: the choice of choosing between Abrams ideology or the secure [unreadable] at researching a conflated region.

### Sample "Expert" Review:

Comments on: Group 1: Ranking: 2<sup>nd</sup> place

The major points of the original paragraph are presented more lucidly here. However I found it difficult to follow the flow from one point to another. For instance, the paragraph begins with what would seem to be its signature point, 'cartographic anxiety', but then transitions into Abrams, with little introduction. Krishna's points of 'cartographic anxiety' works better as an elaboration of empirical material. Here however, it is put forth as the 'lead', if you will, which is then followed by a series of clear, but disjointed sentences. Overall, the paragraph would benefit from a reordering of the major points.

Comments on: Group 2: Ranking: 3<sup>rd</sup> place

An interesting tactic here in splitting up the paragraph into two. This works insofar as it separates the research-based evidence (para 2) and the general theoretical framework (para 1), but the second paragraph seems to put the cart before the horse in beginning with mention of "further reflecting" and then going into the "initially" sentence. Would it not make sense to invert the order here? Speaking of inverting, what if the writer put forth his research experiences and then moved into broader theoretical elaboration. Ultimately, this would involve inverting the entire paragraphs. A seemingly major revision, within a small part of writing, but it is worth considering the merit of leading with evidence.

Comments on: Group 3: Ranking: 1<sup>st</sup> Place

I select this as this winner because it reads very clearly, largely a product of organizing the prose into two coherent paragraphs, and because the wording and ordering of ideas within the paragraph is efficient and lucid.

That said, I will echo my response to the Group 2's revisions in noting that I wonder if the now-two paragraphs would be better if they were inverted. As is, the major analytic issue (as is highlighted so adroitly by Abrams) precedes the real evidential meat of the matter (which comes in paragraph 2). I am imagining an inversion of the paragraphs and how this would profitably conjoin evidence and theoretical elaboration in a way that allows the reader to sink his/her teeth into the research, and then savor the taste with some theoretical elaboration (ala Abrams).

Comments on: Group 4: Ranking 4<sup>th</sup> place

The individual ideas seem to have undergone obfuscation in the editorial process. Particularly confounding was the statement, "By not posing these questions the researcher corrupts his/her desire to follow Abrams' ideology." Overall I found the ideas to lack internal clarity, and the ordering seems to lack logical flow.

### Overall Ranking:

	Reviewer 1	Reviewer 2	Reviewer 3	Reviewer 4	Totals
Group 1	4	3	4	3	14
Group 2	3	4	2	2	11
Group 3	2	2	1	4	9
Group 4	1	1	3	1	6

Explanation of scoring: Highest ranked paragraph gets 4 points, 2nd highest 3, etc.

